

Sermon on Gen 3: “The Alluring Power of Plants”

For 2018-3-25 at Berkeley Friends Church by Keith Barton

Scripture: Gen 1:12,29; Gen 3:6-7; 2Esdras 1:20; Gen 9:20-21; Gen 14,22-24; Ps 1:3; Rev 22:2

[Note: Material in square [brackets] is added to another quotation. Material in {brackets} is deleted from the reading. [] indicates a short pause.]

Gen 1:¹² (NASB) The earth brought forth [a]vegetation, [a]plants yielding seed after [a]their kind, and trees bearing fruit [a]with seed in them, after [a]their kind; and God saw that it was good.

Gen 1:²⁹ Then God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the [an]surface of all the earth, and every tree [a]which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you;

Gen 3:⁶ When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a {delight} [alluring] to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make *one* wise,¹ she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened, ... and they sewed fig leaves together [to cover themselves].

[In] 2Esdras 1:20, God is reported to say, “Because of the [desert] heat I clothed you with the leaves of trees.”

[Back to] Gen 9:20-21 ²⁰ [After leaving the ark,] Noah began [a]farming and [he] planted a vineyard. ²¹ He drank of the wine and became drunk,

Gen 30:14, 22-24 ¹⁴ Now in the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, “Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes.” ²² Then God remembered Rachel, and God gave heed to her and opened her womb. ²³ So she conceived and bore a son and said, “God has taken away my reproach.” ²⁴ She named him Joseph, saying, “May the LORD[m]give me another son.”

[Be aware that the Hebrew word, *dudaim*, which is translated as mandrakes in this passage, refers to a plant that is no longer identifiable. However, it was perceived to enhance female fertility.]

¹ The Hebrew word *sechel* is typically translated as “intelligence” or “wise” in Gen 3:6. However, it also means craftiness and the outsmarting of others. The woman anticipates that the forbidden fruit will enhance *sechel* – and to all appearances it does so. Humans prefer *sechel* to wisdom or intelligence; this, too, reflects human frailty. Ironically, the woman, in seeking *sechel*, had been outsmarted by the snake, but she gets some revenge in Gen 3:15.

[In] Ps 1:3, [we read] {He} [The righteous person] will be like a tree *firmly* planted by ^[b]streams of water, Which yields its fruit in its season, And its ^[c]leaf does not wither.

Rev 22:2b On either side of the river is the tree of life^[b] with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

[The children can leave now for Sunday School.]

Pascal is credited with saying: “If I had more time, I would have written you a shorter letter.” That adage probably applies to this sermon as well, [] but I am attempting, here, to make a new interpretation of the single most-contentious passage in the entire Bible: the 3rd chapter of Genesis. So bear with me if I exceed my optimum length of 15 minutes, and recall that not so long ago, sermons lasted for an hour, sometimes 2 or 3 hours. By those historical standards, this will be brief.

I had first intended to begin a series of messages on John Calvin today, but I had a new insight on how to approach that convoluted topic. Just as I began the series on Martin Luther with the first chapter of Genesis, I thought it would be fitting to begin a series on Calvin with the 3rd chapter of Genesis, the account of the snake and the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden. Perhaps no one has been more invested in the 3rd chapter of Genesis than John Calvin, hence it is an apt place to begin a series of commentaries on this great Reformer from Geneva.

[Yet] at the same time, I also thought that the 3rd chapter of Genesis would be a little harsh to read with children in the room, so instead, [] I collected a series of Bible verses that illustrate the alluring powers of plants. These verses start in the first chapter of Genesis and go the very last chapter of Revelations. One verse that shows the power of plants is Noah’s vineyard, which he plants soon after leaving the ark and which leads him into some dark escapade involving his grandson. If the generation following the flood represents God’s second attempt at creation, then that passage about Noah’s vineyard is a reprise of the 3rd chapter of Genesis.² But more on this later.

Now that the children have left the room, perhaps we can focus the explanation of human depravity offered in the 3rd chapter of Genesis. While you might suspect that I have some doubts about the usual interpretation of this chapter, I can assure you that I have no doubt about the depth of human depravity, including my own. Quakers who presume “that of God” in everyone, without sounding the depths of the “ocean of darkness” that wells up in the human heart, are sadly deluded. Similarly, those secular groups that trust in the natural capacity of the proletariat to generate a communist utopia are under a still greater delusions. But even more so, those Christians and economists who believe that an Invisible Hand regulates the gears of capitalism to generate a benevolent economy, if only the

² Similarly, Ex. 32 is a reprise of Gen 3 in the 3rd creation story at Sinai in Ex. 19.

government does not interfere with those fragile market forces, [these] are, very likely, the most deluded and dangerous group of all in our current world.

So yes, we live in perilous times, operating both within us as individuals and in the in social settings we live in. The 3rd chapter of Genesis is the ancient attempt to explain the dire situations in which we find ourselves. Hence it deserves careful and thoughtful consideration. As is often the case, we will find that examining the Hebrew text offers new and compelling interpretations of this familiar story.

As you know, the 1st Chapter of Genesis offers one account of creation, based on the six days of Creation, culminating in Sabbath rest on the 7th day. In contrast, the 2nd chapter of Genesis offers an entirely different, and presumably older, account of creation that involves molding Adam from the dust of the earth, invigorated by the breath of God, and later extracting a woman from the rib cage of an anaesthetized Adam to produce a servant and spouse for Adam. Together, they represent the parents of all humans. However, in the 3rd chapter in Genesis, the rubber meets the road and history shifts from idyll/idle [] to odyssey. A talking snake appears to charm the woman – she does not actually receive the Hebrew name of *Chavah* [Eve]³ until the end of Chapter 3, after her life has already changed dramatically. Rather than a snake charmer, we have instead a charming snake, the most *subtil* of creatures, as the KJV puts it. This snake questions the woman, leading her to doubt God’s prohibition on eating a particular fruit, produced by the tree of the knowledge of good and bad. After the snake draws attention to this tree, its fruit becomes alluring, enticing and irresistible to the woman, and she eats it, as does Adam. Oddly enough, neither the woman nor Adam remark on the flavor of the fruit; perhaps it was a disappointment. Moreover, the promised knowledge of good and bad is, initially, rather modest; it was primarily a sense of immodesty, the awareness of their nakedness. However, the Hebrew word for nakedness, *aerum*, also means vulnerable. Their first response to nakedness is to fashion a sort of loin-cloth from fig leaves. God soon comes along to inquire about their new wardrobe, and Adam replies that “[this] woman you gave to me, [she] offered me [fruit] from the tree, and I ate [it].” Adam implied that God was at fault here, for creating a woman, rather than for anything Adam had done. Adam’s retort shows that the vaunted fruit failed to impart much insight, much less a knowledge of good and bad, at least in the short term.

But Adam does have a point here. Why did God place a booby trap in the Garden of Eden? It sounds like giving Pandora a box with the instructions never to open it. Many fables involve a tantalizing prohibition: never look in the closet, never open the book of magical incantations, never climb the tower, and we know that such prohibitions always prove irresistible for human curiosity. Even the Church of Rome insisted for centuries, never open the Bible, on pain of death, but as we know, that prohibition failed as well and led to the Reformation. But is Genesis 3 just another version of the tantalizing prohibition? If so, it hardly seems enough to sustain a theological structure that has lasted for over 2000 years. What else could be going on here?

³ *Chavah* means farm; it seems to imply that the woman was created to be a baby factory/farm.

The Hebrew text takes an unexpected twist at this point, because in the Hebrew, Adam does not actually say, “and I ate [it].” Instead, Adam says, “and I will eat [it].” In fact, both Adam and the woman use this same verb, *va’oheil*, as they separately reply to God’s interrogation.⁴ According to Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler,⁵ Adam and the woman recognize that they cannot stop eating the forbidden fruit.⁶ They say to God, “I ate [it], and I will eat again.” Is this because they are obstinate or because they recognize that they are overwhelmed by the effects of this fruit? Dessler favors the second interpretation: once they have tasted the fruit, they cannot resist it. They make a realistic assessment and admit to God that given the opportunity, they will eat the forbidden fruit again and again. Is this simply another version of the tantalizing prohibition. Perhaps not. The fruit was not particularly tasty, but it must have had some amazing effects, just as wine had a notorious effect upon Noah after leaving the ark.

Well, it would be easy to jump to the conclusion that the forbidden fruit is simply sex, plain and simple, look no further, Sigmund Freud and Sister Mary Agnes have explained everything. However, there are some points against this presumption. First is that in chapter 2, there is strong textual evidence that Adam and his woman are already engaging in sex before they encounter the talking snake. As soon as Adam recovers from his anaesthesia, the text says “For this reason, a man shall leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife and they shall become one flesh. They were both naked, Adam and his woman, and they were not ashamed.” (Gen 2:24,25) This is a pretty explicit acknowledgement that sex was immediately available to Adam as soon as he sees his woman. Moreover, there is evidence in the Hebrew text that both Cain and Abel were born in the Garden of Eden,⁷ before they ate the forbidden fruit. Hence, there is no suggestion in the Hebrew that sex *per se* was either the cause of the expulsion from Eden, nor that the forbidden fruit was simply a metaphor for sex.

{Moreover, the Bible does not generally restrict sexual activity within a marriage covenant. Even the bristly Apostle Paul, who constantly rails against fornication, recommends that husband and wife not withhold intimacy from each other except during periods set aside for prayer and fasting.}

At the same time, there are abundant suggestions in the text that something of a sexual nature occurred between Adam and his woman, as a result of eating the forbidden fruit. First, there is a snake, both a phallic symbol, and a sign of danger. Then there is the sudden preoccupation with nakedness and immodesty immediately following the incident of eating the fruit. Finally, there is the curse of painful childbirth as a punishment for the crime.⁸

At this point, let me suggest that the reason that this passage of the Bible has been wrought with so much ambiguity and mystery over the millennia lies not in the framework of the story itself, but in the

⁴ See Shottenstein’s *Interlinear Chumash* (2006), page 17, footnote to Gen 3:12-13.

⁵ Rabbi Dessler died in 1953 in Jerusalem as a respected teacher and commentator. His comments on *va’oheil* are in *Michtav Me’Eliyahu*.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.* Page 20, footnote to Gen 4:1.

⁸ Some commentators do not see this as a curse. See *Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, ed. by Dr. J. H. Hertz, C.H., 2nd Ed. (1967), pg. 12, footnote to 3:16.

reader's frame of reference. The framework of the story, as it was crafted and redacted in the 4th C. BCE, emphasizes disobedience as the essential sin that merits punishment from an angry, though patient, God. That is a worthy message in its own right, {particularly in the historical context of the exile to Babylon and the Jewish return to Jerusalem}. However, it places God in a naked and vulnerable situation if God planted a booby-trap in Eden merely to trick Adam and his spouse into disobedience. Evidently, God did not know His human creation nearly as well as He thought He did. The first human couple fails at its first serious test and has never fully recovered. Moreover, God expels the couple from Eden, ostensibly to prevent them from gaining immortality in their defective state. What kind of God is this? In a modern era of informed consent, what would it take for Adam to understand death before Adam had witnessed death? What, in fact, could accountability for sin mean [] without some prior experience of sin?

Let me suggest that another metaphor could be operating in this story of the forbidden fruit: a metaphor that represents entheogens. Entheogens are plants that induce perceptions of divinity, inexplicable peace or tranquility, and/or a sense of amazement at the experience of life. Entheogens include psilocybin, ayahuasca, and opium. Some people would include LSD and cannabis. Entheogens are typically hard to find, forbidden, and subject to punishment when used. They are most closely associated with shamanism. A bundle of cannabis was recently found in {what appeared to be} a shaman's grave in central Asia. Now, lest you think that I am planning to advocate the use of entheogens, I am not. There are perfectly good reasons to avoid them, and the 3rd chapter of Genesis provides a framework for understanding this restriction. If my conjecture is correct, the writer of Genesis is saying "don't mess with entheogens, unless you are prepared to pay a price." But even so, entheogens are part of creation as we know it, and presumably entheogens are included in the broad judgement in the 1st chapter of Genesis that all seed bearing plants are good⁹ and that they are suitable for food.¹⁰ So entheogens may have valid uses, but they can also be misused. Entheogens may be addictive, [] and they may pose risks to sanity in vulnerable individuals. Moreover, no one knows, in advance, just how they will react to an entheogen. We are, after all, naked -- and quite vulnerable -- beneath our clothing.

Now is this all that Genesis 3 is saying? No, that's not my point. The conventional interpretation of this chapter is still relevant and, in fact, it is necessary within the context of the Bible as a whole. But for this era we are living in, when entheogens are known, talked about, and often readily available, this chapter can have new meaning and relevance that was not available to previous generations of Jewish and Christian interpreters who lived in more innocent times. Not until the 20th C. did knowledge of entheogens return. It had been suppressed along with the practices of shamanism and witchcraft during the Middle Ages.

While I don't want to over-interpret this conjecture, I do want to provide a few more details. First, from a shamanic perspective, a talking snake is not surprising. Many shamans report receiving information

⁹ Gen 1:12

¹⁰ Gen 1:29

about psychoactive plants from animals. Sometimes this is as mundane as watching squirrels eating maple leaves in the early spring and thereby discovering the sweet sap of the maple tree. Sometimes it is a talking animal that directs a shaman to a particular plant with instructions on how to use it or to combine it with other plants, as with ayahuasca. Again, I am not advocating the use of shamanic rituals or plants. I am simply reporting that creation is more mysterious than we commonly assume; animals know more than we ordinarily suspect, and we humans are more vulnerable or “naked” than we might like to think.

So in particular regard to the legalization of cannabis or prescription opiates such as Percocet, or illegal stimulants such as cocaine, anything that causes us to feel better temporarily, will often cause us to feel worse after it wears off. Pain medications can generate paradoxical pain with sustained use at too large a dose. This is a direct effect of how these substances work on the nervous system. They release neurotransmitters, and after their effect ends, we are depleted for some time of those same neurotransmitters. It is typically a zero sum game at best, and often a lose-lose in the long-run, particularly if repeated use leads to addiction.

{However, there are exceptions to this general rule. Anti-depressants, which do not cause euphoria, can relieve depression without a major risk of worsening depression.}

Moreover, a lot of recreational drugs lead to alterations in sexual perception and behavior. Perhaps this is what caused Adam and Eve to sew fig leaves together to cover their shame. Perhaps the talking snake led them to an entheogen that changed the way they experienced intimacy. Maybe it was the fermented grapes that Noah enjoyed;¹¹ perhaps it was another fruit, such as the *dudaim*, that we now know nothing about. In any event, they experienced a vivid, life-transforming, irresistible and somewhat regrettable experience. Part of that experience elevated their sensory perception, but then there was a subsequent fall. The fall was so profound that it changed the self-perception of Adam and his offspring throughout history. This was no mere intoxication; it was intoxication followed by a sobering insight. It was the knowledge of good and bad, after all: the first step to self-knowledge.

This encounter with entheogens probably led our forebearers to a more realistic reappraisal of what it means to be human: specifically, “I ate and, given the opportunity, I will eat again.” And yet, this realization itself produces profound ambivalence, because it calls into question human agency. Who is in charge, after all, me or the forbidden and alluring fruit? This loss of agency feels like [and is] a fall from grace – as anyone involved with Alcoholics Anonymous will attest. It produces profound self-doubt. Yet it is also an essential component of mature self-knowledge. Without the experience of the Fall, we are naïve about our true vulnerability and nakedness.

Our theology tells us that the curse of working by the sweat of our brow [Gen 3:19] is a punishment from God for Adam’s disobedience in the Garden of Eden, but rather than a curse, we might view work as the opportunity to do something creative to relieve the boredom of intoxication. If we realize that a

¹¹ Gen 9

few mg. of THC in cannabis can produce a sweet sense of satisfaction, without any demonstrable effort, we might be seriously tempted to maintain that blissful condition by repeated use. That of course is a step toward addiction, although not everyone who uses cannabis or opium reaches a stage of overt addiction. But even without that risk of addiction, we should recall that meaningful achievements require persistent confrontation with frustrations and unhappiness in our lives. One must struggle with an obstacle in order to overcome it. The Quaker Wm Penn wrote a book entitled *No Cross, No Crown* to illustrate this point. Thus we should become more willing to tolerate frustration, rather than seek the solace of alcohol or the effortless contentment produced by cannabis. If nothing else, it does not seem fair to those who struggle with deprivation if we are living in perpetual peace and artificially induced contentment.

We will be both more motivated and more capable if we can learn to *treasure* dissatisfaction as a God-given gift, which is necessary for personal transformation and social betterment. This is another important message hidden in the 3rd chapter of Genesis.

However, a more cautionary consideration is that plants are only one source of excessive contentment that can lead to inertia. Any form of self-indulgence or distraction can do this, whether it is music, exercise, spectator sports or computer games. This perspective is part and parcel of the English Reformation that we associate with Puritanism. Quakers both internalized and rejected the Puritanism of 17th C. England. Hopefully, we will soon get to examine this ambiguity in greater detail. But first we need to explore the writings of John Calvin in the weeks ahead.

Postscript

Avi (an Israeli friend),

My broader point, here, is that Gen 3 relates to some distant shamanic event -- which very likely did involve some kind of mind-altering plant, lost in the mists of time -- but this memory was subverted by the post-exilic Final Redactor (very possibly the governor, Ezra) circa 350 BCE into a parable about Divine Law/Decree and human rebellion that subverts all of human history. One reason for this redaction is to keep people in line; governors don't like rebellious subjects. If disobedience to God is a sin, perhaps people won't disobey the governor either. Read the book of Ezra to get some idea of the historical period. In either case, the human default is to continue "eating" -- whether consuming traif or mind-altering plants or wine.

While I try, here, to de-emphasize Ezra's preoccupation with Divine punishment for rebellion against a Divine decree, my point is that anything that raises mood will also lower it, and this is not punishment per se, but the nature of how the mind works, something that was opaque until the late 20th C. So maybe there is a touch of Buddhism in my interpretation, which ought to be more broadly palatable than Protestant Fall and Redemption theology, and is, in any event, more contemporary since we (once again) live in an era of plants with shamanic powers. KB